

Revenge wheel: The serial protagonists of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

This is an edited version of an essay originally written for 'ENGL394 – Popular Theatre: Polemic, Mirror, Satire' at Macquarie University in April 2011.

*T'will vex thy soul to hear what I shall speak;
For I must talk of murders, rapes and massacres,
Acts of black night, abominable deeds...*

Aaron, V.1.62-64

Titus Andronicus has been maligned and derided for its excessive depiction of, and reliance upon, violence and brutality since its writing and performance in 1594. Despite Shakespeare's age at the time of writing *Titus Andronicus*,¹ the play displays a markedly youthful brashness and sensationalistic attitude which highlights his knowledge of classical authors and sources, as well as a desire to create a work which appealed to a wide audience.² Throughout the play Shakespeare harnesses the conventions of a revenge tragedy to his now-trademark sophistication of language, humour and rhythm, and challenges the established perception and tolerance of violence and abuse, as well as its implications and consequences. In doing so, Shakespeare shows how *Titus Andronicus* is "as much about how the audience experiences violence as entertainment as it is about the tragedy of the endless cycle of violence itself,"³ and thus demonstrates how popular theatre avoids adhering to the status quo of the period and, in this case, for all time.

In the closing decades of the sixteenth century, "English drama ... was created to fill... a new cultural niche. [The] theatres generated a voracious demand for fresh wit, and [were] characterised by

¹ Shakespeare appears to have been about thirty years old in 1594.

² Coppélia Kahn, "The Daughter's Seduction in *Titus Andronicus*, or, Writing Is the Best Revenge," in *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997), 46.

³ Julie Taymor on *Titus*, in Eileen Blumenthal, Julie Taymor, and Antonio Monda, *Julie Taymor, Playing with Fire: Theatre, Opera, Film*, Third ed. (New York: Abrams, 2007), 194.

innovation, competition and complex forms of collaboration.”⁴ At the time *Titus Andronicus* was written, theatre companies “closely monitored their rivals... imitating each other’s successes”⁵ and Shakespeare’s play can be construed as both an homage and parody of Christopher Marlowe’s *The Massacre at Paris* and *Tamburlaine*, and Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. It is an emboldened and daringly original work, in which Shakespeare challenges the boundaries of sensationalism, entertainment, taboo and social critique.

Peter Ackroyd proposes that *Titus Andronicus* was “a play that [attempted] to beat Kyd and Marlowe at their own game... [borrowing] structure and detail from Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*.”⁶ “Where Kyd gave [him] the model for the passion and revenge of Titus, Marlowe gave him ideas for his villains.”^{7, 8} In responding to the influences and successes of the period, Shakespeare created a play that examines contemporaneous issues such as monarchical succession, justice, revenge, and the role, function and nature of violence. It is through an examination of the interrelations between Romans and Goths, the civilised and barbaric, that Shakespeare is able to deconstruct the boundaries that define the foundations of Elizabethan and contemporary society, challenging the idea of the taboo, and showing that the “real enemy lies within”⁹ – that everyone is, and can be, capable of intolerable cruelties: “ultimately Titus killing his daughter [is] Bosnia. Or whatever the latest outrage is.”¹⁰

Titus Andronicus is a revenge tragedy that draws upon classical allusions, mythologies and histories, as well as the conventions of the Senecan model of Tragedy – the most recognised model available to the Elizabethans – and repeatedly challenges the status quo and presents a radicalised image of mankind’s reaction to the horrors it encounters. The play can be read as an exploration on the abuse, denigration, victimisation, demonization and brutalisation of women. The most harrowing example of this misogynistic perspective is the rape of Lavinia, an act which for all the play’s brutality and exsanguination is not actually presented on stage. Rather, “[it conforms] with an age-old code, [and is] categorised as ‘obscene,’ literally something which must take place, from the Latin ‘*ob scena*,’ ‘off

⁴ Suzanne Gossett, “Dramatic Achievements,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500-1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 153.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (London: Vintage Books, 2005), 157.

⁷ Jonathan Bate in Introduction, in William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate, *The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1995, 2006), 87.

⁸ Critic Harold Bloom disagrees: “To call *Titus Andronicus* a mere send-up of Marlowe and Kyd hardly seems sufficient; it is a blowup, an explosion of rancid irony carried well past the limits of parody. Nothing else by Shakespeare is so sublimely lunatic; it prophesies not King Lear and *Coriolanus*, but Artaud.” (Bloom, p83)

⁹ Kahn, “The Daughter’s Seduction in *Titus Andronicus*, or, Writing Is the Best Revenge,” 47.

¹⁰ Richard Schechner and Julie Taymor, “Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to ‘the Lion King’: An Interview,” *TDR* Vol. 43, no. No. 3 - Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects. (Autumn) (1999): 47.

stage.”¹¹ Julie Taymor, in her 1999 film *Titus*,¹² turns this deed, via a flashback intercut with Lavinia writing on the ground, into an act of “raw animal aggression, deploying imagery from the play that figures Lavinia as a doe and Chiron and Demetrius as tigers,”¹³ blurring the distinction between symbolism and reality.

Throughout his career, Shakespeare drew heavily upon classical sources, from Ovid and Homer to Greek and Roman mythologies and histories. Throughout *Titus Andronicus*, he “breaks them down [and] forces them into gruesome and unexpected new settings,”¹⁴ creating a “complex and self-conscious improvisation upon classical sources”¹⁵ which still resonates with and challenges audiences today. A key example of this is in II.4, when Marcus discovers the mutilated Lavinia and “addresses her in bizarrely stylised rhetoric:”¹⁶

Why dost not speak to me?
Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stirr'd with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
Coming and going with thy honey breath.
But, sure, some Tereus hath deflowered thee,
And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue. [II.4.21-27]

Marcus’ language hereby challenges the status quo and presents a radicalised image of mankind’s reaction to the horrors encountered forthwith, following in the Senecan model’s structure and function which was “based more on declamation than on action: the expression of emotion in elaborate rhetorical form ... its very lifeblood.”¹⁷ Marcus’ speech, whilst heavily Ovidian in inspiration, consciously aestheticises Lavinia’s torture and is deliberately confrontational, demanding that the audience becomes him and shares his grief, forcing them to confront and negotiate the “terrible gulf between florid words and theatrical reality.”¹⁸ As there is no opportunity to look away throughout this scene, the horror is magnified; the implications and resonances are more deeply felt because the sight is present in front of us. Throughout this and the following scene in which Lavinia is presented to Titus, as throughout the entire play, Shakespeare constantly blurs the boundaries between taboo and decorum – what can and can’t be shown on stage. In doing so, it can be argued that he presents

¹¹ Christopher Booker, “Why Sex and Violence? The Active Ego. The Twentieth-Century Obsession: From De Sade to the Terminator,” in *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Continuum Books, 2004), 455-56.

¹² Julie Taymor, “Titus,” (Italy / USA / UK Clear Blue Sky Productions / Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999).

¹³ David McCandless, “A Tale of Two Tituses: Julie Taymor’s Vision on Stage and Screen,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* Vol. 53 no. No. 4 - Winter (2002): 503.

¹⁴ Andrew Dickson, *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare*, Second ed. (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2009), 372.

¹⁵ Bate in Introduction, *Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus*, 3.

¹⁶ Dickson, *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare*, 372.

¹⁷ Bate in Introduction, *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸ Dickson, *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare*, 373.

a more affecting, harrowing and realistic portrait of grief and trauma than anything before or since. Throughout much of the later half of the play, Lavinia's mutilated and ravished body – as well as the actuality of the act of rape itself – is flaunted and concealed, illustrated and censored, “[existing] as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety, contradiction and censorship,”¹⁹ unapologetically challenging the audience's toleration and acceptance of such a deed. Shakespeare further addresses the impact and consequences of the horror by introducing darkly humorous puns and wordplay, whereby Aaron, Chiron and Demetrius – even Titus himself – make too-frequent references to hands, hewing and trimming, often likening Lavinia to a tree:²⁰

what stern ungentle hands
Have lopp'd and hew'd and made thy body bare
Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments,
Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in.²¹

The use of humour at these points is deliberately confrontational and is employed as a form of catharsis, a way of making sense of the tragedy; in doing so, Shakespeare challenges further the notion and limits of decorum and the established code of behaviour in a perversely ironic way.

Throughout the play, as throughout his oeuvre, Shakespeare often uses humour to diffuse the full garish impact of the brutality, and in doing so, manages to amplify that which he seeks to assuage. Following Lavinia's rape, Titus – her own father – puns relentlessly on the usefulness and significance of hands, which is only compounded by the fact he has but one: “O handle not the theme to talk of hands, / Lest he remember still that we have none” [III.2.29-20]. Similarly, when Titus and the remaining members of the Andronici are presented with the heads of two of his sons, the inclusion of Lavinia in his reaction appears to explicitly draw attention to that which she lacks: ““Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth,” he commands, making her the handmaid of his revenge, a metaphor gruesomely literalized [in V.1] when with her stumps she holds a basin to catch the blood while he slits the throats of her attackers.”²² Through the use of humour, even in such blatant ways, Shakespeare manages to confront the assumptions and established conventions of both the Senecan model of tragedy and Elizabethan (and, indeed, contemporary) theatre, urging the audience to rethink their position and reactions to such events and conventions.

Throughout *Titus Andronicus*, the audience's perception and interpretation of the play's events is channeled through the focalisation of a key protagonist who drives the action, eliciting an important

¹⁹ Kahn, "The Daughter's Seduction in *Titus Andronicus*, or, Writing Is the Best Revenge," 58.

²⁰ See also II.3.1-10 and V.1.93.

²¹ Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, Marcus, II.4.16-19.

²² Kahn, "The Daughter's Seduction in *Titus Andronicus*, or, Writing Is the Best Revenge," 60.

emotional and often sympathetic connection with the audience. This focalization changes twice during the course of the play – from Tamora to Aaron to Titus – and has led to their being labelled as “serial protagonists.”²³ Tamora first challenges the status quo when her desperate attempts to save her eldest son are ignored, and he is sacrificed to appease the Roman gods. Setting in motion the play’s unbreakable revenge cycle (“O cruel, irreligious piety!” [I.1.133]), this moment marks the moment when she, as a character, becomes more clearly psychologically defined than a mere former-captive: “we understand her motivations [and] watch in horror as the lust for vengeance transforms her into [a] Goddess of Vengeance.”²⁴ Turning her back on her husband and Emperor, she seduces both the audience and her former fellow-captive Aaron the Moor, instigating a shift in the play’s tension and power dynamic, and introduces the next in the series of protagonists.

Aaron the Moor is a Marlovian villain-hero, modeled on Marlowe’s Barabas (from *The Jew of Malta*) in much the same way that Richard III is. The resulting character is an engagingly original²⁵ “Marlovian monster, more outrageous than anyone in Marlowe,”²⁶ and “the first great black role in English drama.”²⁷ At first, Aaron appears to be “the devil incarnate,”²⁸ but as his function in the play increases, the audience perceives a shift towards his dominance and the allure of his enigmatic and compelling paradoxical nature asserts his position as the second protagonist in the revenge cycle.²⁹ Aaron’s disarming delight in black humour, coupled with his destructive “nihilistic, atheistic [and] calculating”³⁰ attitude, makes him the perfect foil to Titus’ initial unwavering sense of morality and justice. It is Aaron who instructs Chiron and Demetrius to the murder of Bassianus and the rape of Lavinia; Aaron who killed Titus’ two sons in the pit in the forest; Aaron who, through his son “the babe, as loathsome as a toad” [IV.2.69],³¹ leads to Tamora’s demise as well as that of the Nurse and midwife. As Aaron’s life is threatened at the play’s end, he bargains with the Goths to ensure the safety of his son, his only regret is that though

[he has] done a thousand dreadful things
As willingly as one would kill a fly,

²³ John Wrathall, “Titus (1999) [Review],” British Film Institute, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/563>

²⁴ Taymor in Director’s Notes, Julie Taymor and William Shakespeare, *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), 175.

²⁵ Robert A. Logan, ““Unfelt Imaginations”: Influence and Characterization in ‘the Massacre at Paris,’ ‘Titus Andronicus,’ and ‘Richard III,’” in *Shakespeare’s Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare’s Artistry* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 37.

²⁶ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1998), 82.

²⁷ Jonathan Bate in Introduction, Taymor and Shakespeare, *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ While Aaron isn’t explicitly revenging against anything, Julie Taymor argues that Shakespeare, through the character of Aaron, has “painted a picture of racism that is unparalleled in his other plays” [Taymor: 2000, 178] and that Aaron could be revenging against the inscribed racism evident within contemporary society [McCandless: 2002, 494].

³⁰ Taymor and Shakespeare, *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay*, 178.

³¹ See also IV.2.75-78 – “What hast thou done? / Thou hast undone our mother. / Villain I have done thy mother.”

And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.³²

“He is thoroughly delighted in the machinations of evil, even gleeful, and, when it comes to his son, exhibits the very compassion, love, and vain hope that [Marlowe] warns against,”³³ through his character of Barabas. By ensuring that Aaron ultimately dies as a human and not a stony-hearted villain as in Marlowe’s tragedies, Shakespeare challenges the audience’s perception of the function and status-quo of the villain-hero.

The last eight scenes of *Titus Andronicus* – from the knowledge of Lavinia’s attackers in IV.1 through to the conclusion – see the rise of Titus as the ultimate revenger, the final protagonist. Earlier in the play, Titus briefly fulfils the position of protagonist (in III.1) when he is presented with the heads of his sons and his hand, the hand that was meant to save them. Disregarding the decorum as dictated by the Senecan model (“Now is a time to storm” [III.1.264]), Titus laughs (“Ha, ha, ha!”) because he has “not another tear to shed” [III.1.267], and plays his own fool, the moment of laughter “intensifying rather than [diminishing] the passionate fellow-feeling of tragedy.”³⁴ Shakespeare pushes the boundaries of convention “between true expression and false, sanity and madness, speech and silence [because] he is intrigued by tears [and] laughter, [the] intensely physiological expressions of inner states.”³⁵ Titus’ greatest act of revenge, however, comes when “Tamora and her two Sons disguised” [V.2.s.d] appear before him, masquerading as the gods of Revenge, Rape and Murder, respectively. At first, Titus appears to be mad but, like Hamlet, he has in fact been “preparing for a public act.”³⁶ In a clever and subtle display of intellect, ‘mad’ Titus sees through his visitors’ disguises for what they are: “the device has been reversed – the vehicle for Tamora’s revenge against Titus [becomes] the vehicle for Titus’ revenge against Tamora for the rape of Lavinia”³⁷ and the death of his sons and family. Shakespeare reasserts the favoured notion that “all the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players” [*As You Like It*, II.7.138-139], a device that Titus eagerly adopts when he plays the cook in a deed which “closely resembles an Aaron act in its cruelty and creativity.”³⁸ In the play’s ultimate and climactic scenes, Shakespeare-as-Titus stretches the boundaries of taste, decorum and the revenge model to their fullest and most garish conclusions, further blurring the line “between illusion and substance” beyond distinction, until “the

³² Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, V.1.141-44.

³³ Logan, ““Unfelt Imaginations”: Influence and Characterization in ‘the Massacre at Paris,’ ‘Titus Andronicus,’ and ‘Richard III,’” 37.

³⁴ Jonathan Bate in Introduction, Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, 12.

³⁵ Jonathan Bate in Introduction, Taymor and Shakespeare, *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay*, 9-10.

³⁶ Bate in Introduction, Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁸ Taymor in Director’s Notes, Taymor and Shakespeare, *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay*, 178.

nightmare takes over the plot and madness becomes clarity, preparing us for the worst when the most unimaginable will actually occur.”³⁹

Titus Andronicus is a play that constantly pushes the boundaries of excess and taste, convention and expectation; a play that challenges the status quo of the popular theatre through its violence, humour, wit and characters. Yet it is “[precisely] *because* of all its extremities, [that] *Titus* is *the* Shakespeare play for our extreme time ... a compendium of two thousand years of warfare and violence.”⁴⁰ Through its use of Senecan rhetoric and disarmingly black humour to cope with the horrors and violence, to its unwavering on-stage depiction of dismemberment; from the serial protagonists embodied in Tamora, Aaron and Titus, to its carnage-laden conclusion, *Titus Andronicus* remains the finest theatrical example of a work that challenges the fundamental constitution of contemporary society’s beliefs as well as the structure and function(s) of its popular theatre.

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³⁹ Ibid., 185.

⁴⁰ Bate in Introduction, Ibid., 10-11.

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